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By Louisa Barber | Sidney Herald

## Interoperability Montana advocates seeking support from legislators

Local Interoperability Montana advocates are seeking support from the 2013 Montana legislative session. Richland County Disaster and Emergency Services director Butch Renders and Deputy Sheriff Denny Palmer presented an update on the sophisticated communications system that when completed would allow various city and county departments to communicate with each other and state agencies across the state.

Public safety entities throughout the state will be able to communicate through high-tech radio microwaves under what's known as Interoperability Montana. It operates on a high frequency, two-way radio system. It does not improve cell phone coverage, which operates on a different frequency. The system benefits all public safety departments from fire and ambulance to law enforcement, following major interstates and highways; it extends across the Hi-Line but on Interstate 90, stops at Billings.



DES director Butch Renders discusses updates on the Interoperability Montana network.

Most of the state is already under Interoperability Montana. Eastern Montana from Richland County to Carter County remains out of the loop.

The system dissolved in June 2011, shortly after progress had been steamrolling to get the county on board in January 2011. Then in September 2011, Gov. Brian Schweitzer got the ball rolling again, ordering the formation of a governing board to operate the radio system and "ensure the future of interoperable communications." Now the project is under way again.

Interoperability Montana, a \$133 million project, has \$66.4 million to fund the system, mostly from Homeland Security and FEMA grants, state appropriations and funds from the Montana Department of Justice, National Guard, the BLM and various state agencies.

Then in January, the governance board established a legislative workgroup – whose members include the associations of law enforcement, emergency services, cities and towns, and fire – to draft legislation that defines the role and authority of the governance board, secure funding for the communications system, and to secure funding for planning and match requirements to build out the system.

Funding continues to be the critical requirement with roughly half of the funds still needed to build the network to include eastern Montana counties.

A system like this will benefit communities, proponents say, especially in rural, isolated areas, during emergencies. Law enforcement and emergency personnel can't depend on cell phone networks, Palmer said, using the Glasgow hospital shooting of 2009 as an example. The incident happened while much of the community was at basketball games, and the school gym was locked down. Cell phone service was overloaded due to over usage when residents tried to contact family members. "So if we'd been counting on emergency services to use cell phones, we'd have been out of business," Palmer said. "Its network is not big enough for when a major emergency or disaster occurs."

Interoperability Montana needs the support of local leaders, he said. "Every one of us has a stake in this fight and when disaster comes to your community you're going to not want to be the one that says I didn't hook on because then you have to deliver the message you couldn't provide the service."

There is currently talk of using existing fiber-optics around the state as a back-up in case the radio system fails to work.

Sen.-elect Matt Rosendale, R-Glendive, said additional support for Interoperability Montana funds is possible, but it would take testimony in Helena by emergency personnel, the Montana Highway Patrol and local leaders like the commissioners. "That is what it's going to take to have them lined up to come in for the committee hearings and say we need this system," he said, adding it would help if commissioners from isolated counties testify that a communications system like this is necessary for emergencies, and officials must notify other counties. "If the commissioners from isolated counties come in and we have the emergency folks from across the state come in to support this, we're going to end up having a much better chance."